

FORTUNE AND FAME

Victoria Christopher Murray ReShonda Tate Billingsley

Chapter 1

Jasmine Cox Larson Bush

Jasmine sat with her eyes opened wide and her mouth clasped shut. But even though not a word passed through her lips, the living room was filled with the joyful sound of laughter.

Slowly, Jasmine rose from the sofa, leaving Mae Frances sitting alone. There was no way her friend would be able to stand right now; Mae Frances was buckled over, laughing so hard that Jasmine was sure she was going to bust a vein.

But Jasmine didn't turn her head to the left nor the right. Her eyes remained focused only on the plasma TV centered on the wall.

"I cannot believe this," Jasmine said, finally speaking.

She took two steps toward the television as if that would help her hear Shaun Robinson, the anchor for Access Hollywood, a little better.

"This has to be quite an exciting time for you," Shaun said. "Especially since you're going to be on the OWN network."

Rachel Jackson Adams stood next to Shaun, cheesing like she was in a Colgate commercial. Her hand was on her hip as if she was posing for the camera, though she came off more looking like a posing seal.

"Well, you know, I was supposed to be on Oprah's show last year," Rachel said to Shaun, though her eyes were on the camera

and not on the anchor. "But due to circumstances where somebody else acted like a fool, my appearance was cancelled."

"Fool?" Mae Frances cackled as she pointed at the television. "I think she's talking about you. She just called you a fool on national TV."

Mae Frances cracked up, and Jasmine's eyes thinned as she watched the unfolding interview. For a moment, she wondered if the steam coming out of her ears would set off the smoke alarm in Mae Frances's apartment.

On the screen, Rachel spoke, her eyes still on the camera, "But even though that didn't work out, Oprah and I kinda became friends and after we hung out a couple of times, Oprah said that I would be the perfect First Lady to be on television because there are so many misconceptions about pastor wives."

"Liar!" Jasmine growled at the screen.

Still chuckling, Mae Frances said, "Why're you calling her a liar? There are a lot of misconceptions about First Ladies."

Jasmine shook her head. "I'm not talking about that part. This whole story about how she and Oprah are friends, you know that's a lie. Oprah's not her friend. Nobody's Rachel's friend. Anyone who knows Rachel for more than five minutes would never be a friend of hers."

"Hmph...I thought you two were friends."

"No," Jasmine said sinking back down onto the couch. "We're more like frenemies. I would never call someone that I couldn't trust a friend."

"Y'all were sure acting mighty friendly last year when you were in Chicago. By the time we got to St. John's I thought you two would be BFs forever."

"Yeah, well," Jasmine said, thinking about everything that she had done for this juvenile-delinquent-on-the-loose. If it hadn't been for her, Rachel would be sitting in a ten-by-ten

concrete cell facing the death penalty for the murder of Pastor Earl Griffith. Of course, it might not have played out that way once the world discovered that Earl Griffith wasn't really dead. But in her mind, right now, Jasmine had wonderful images of Rachel being dragged down a long corridor toward the death chamber.

"So, the reality show is set to begin in a couple of months, right?" Shaun asked Rachel.

Rachel nodded, though she still didn't face Shaun. Her eyes were steady on the camera. "We're going to begin taping in a few weeks and Oprah told me she expects this show to be one of the fall hits."

Yes, Jasmine should have definitely left Rachel rotting in that Chicago jail. If she had, then she'd be the one with a reality show. Not that being on one of those shows had ever been her heart's desire. Reality TV was just not her thing. Jasmine found the women on those shows uncouth and classless. She had too much intelligence to sit in front of a television and watch women share the misery of their lives.

But the fact that Rachel was about to have a reality show made Jasmine reconsider. Maybe a reality show about first ladies was just what America needed. A show with class and substance -- the kind of show that had nothing to do with Rachel Jackson Adams.

"How in the world did this happen?" Jasmine said.

Though she hadn't directed the question to Mae Frances, her friend answered, "That Rachel must have more than those two brain cells you're always talking about. Somehow she figured this out."

"And, she kept it from me. I've talked to her at least a dozen times over the last year and she didn't say a word about this."

"We're still in preproduction right now," Rachel said with her eyes still on the camera. "We're trying to figure out everything about the show. Of course, I'm the star, but the producers are still trying to determine who will be in the supporting roles." Then, Rachel grinned and her eyes peered into the camera as if she was trying to see into everyone's living rooms.

Silly woman! She didn't even know that she was supposed to be looking at Shaun, not at the camera.

Shaun shifted, taking two steps to her right as if she was trying to get Rachel's attention. But Rachel wouldn't turn her head. "Well, we're excited," Shaun finally said, speaking to the side of Rachel's head. "We'll be watching. By the way, Oprah hasn't released the name of the show yet."

"Oh, it's a secret," Rachel said, then batted her false eyelashes.

Jasmine hoped that a couple of those lashes would fall right into her eye! Blind her right there on TV.

"But we will announce it soon," Rachel added.

"Just make sure you come back here and tell us first."

"Definitely," Rachel said.

"Thank you for sharing this with us."

"Thank you for having me."

Jasmine shook her head. That was what...a two to three minute interview? And that swamp pony had never once faced Shaun. How was she supposed to carry a show? There was no way that Oprah had ever spent any time with Rachel or else there wouldn't be a show. How had Rachel pulled this off?

To the camera, Shaun said, "Who's the latest Hollywood couple to adopt a baby in Africa? We'll be right back with that story after this break."

Jasmine grabbed the remote, pointed it at the television as if it was a weapon and clicked it off. The moment the screen faded to black, Jasmine opened her mouth and released a scream that shook the bricks of the Upper East Side building where Mae Frances lived. And as Jasmine shrieked, Mae Frances howled with laughter.

"Ugh," Jasmine growled as she paced in front of her friend. "I just cannot believe this. Rachel is going to have her own television show." She spoke as if she was trying to convince herself that this was a fact. "This cannot be happening to me."

"Well, this is gonna happen, unless you're thinking about shutting it down."

Jasmine slowed her steps. "Yes! That's what I need to do. I need to shut it all down before Rachel becomes a star. Because can you imagine what she'd be like if that was to happen?" Jasmine shuddered. "There would be no talking to her. No," she shook her head, "she cannot have that show." But then, Jasmine paused and tapped her forefinger against her chin. "Wait a minute. Maybe I shouldn't shut it down. Maybe what I need to do is get on that show."

"You want to be on the show with Rachel?"

"Yeah," Jasmine said as if the idea was still forming in her mind. "First, I have to find out what's really going on because Rachel is such a liar, she could have made this whole thing up."

"Well, you've told a few lies in your lifetime, Jasmine Larson," Mae Frances said, calling her by the name she'd been using from the first day they met. "So maybe you shouldn't be so quick to call that buffoon a liar."

"My past sins have nothing to do with this. This is all about Rachel. I have to get some information. But how?" She

took a few more steps, then stopped. Her eyes settled on her friend.

Mae Frances.

The two had been friends for almost ten years, since weeks after Jasmine had moved to New York. And if there was one thing that Jasmine had figured out over that time, it was that Mae Frances knew everybody in America, and beyond this county's shores. That meant that Mae Frances surely knew Oprah.

Jasmine sat down next to her friend on the sofa. "You can help me."

"How?" Mae Frances looked at her sideways.

"You need to call Oprah. You're friends with her, right?"

Mae Frances crinkled her nose like she smelled something bad. "No...did I ever tell you I was friends with Oprah?"

Jasmine's shoulders slumped. This was unbelievable. There was someone that Mae Frances didn't know? "I thought you knew everybody."

"I do. But Oprah ain't everybody. In fact, she's nobody to me."

"Well, Oprah's the person I need for you to know right now because I have to get on that show with Rachel," Jasmine whined, feeling like she was about to throw a tantrum. She surely would if she couldn't find a way to contact Oprah.

"Well if that's all you need to do, we don't need to be talking about Oprah." Mae Frances pushed herself off the sofa. "'Cause I can make a call right now and get in touch with the person who's in charge of everything that has to do with Oprah."

Jasmine blinked like she was trying to clear out her thoughts. "If you're not friends with Oprah, who are you gonna call? Gayle?"

"Gayle King? Please. She might run one or two things here and there, but I'm talking about the real Negro in charge of Oprah and her business. I'm calling Stedman."

Now, Jasmine's eyes were wide. "Stedman Graham?"

"You know another Stedman?"

"Oh, my god, you know him?"

"Yeah," Mae Frances said in a tone that sounded like it was no big deal. "Stedman's the reason why Oprah and I aren't friends."

"Because of Stedman?"

"Yeah," Mae Frances said with a little chuckle. "He's one...." She glanced over at Jasmine who was staring at her with wide eyes and Mae Frances cleared her throat. "Let me just make this call. Stedman will get you on that show."

Mae Frances turned toward her bedroom, and Jasmine followed. Suddenly, Mae Frances stopped, making Jasmine bump right into her. She faced Jasmine. "Where are you going?"

"With you. I wanna hear what Stedman's going to say."

"Excuse you...but this is a private call. You don't need to know what Stedman says to me as long as he says yes to getting you on that show." Then, Mae Frances walked into her bedroom. "I'll be out when I'm finished." She closed the door and then, Jasmine's mouth opened wide when she heard her friend click the lock.

Jasmine folded her arms and stood in the middle of the living room, stunned. She should have been insulted, but how could she be? Mae Frances was about to hook her up!

"Oh, yeah," Jasmine said as she plopped back down on the couch. It wouldn't take Mae Frances more than ten minutes to work it all out. Jasmine Cox Larson Bush was about to crash Rachel's party.

She laughed as she thought about Rachel's face once she heard the news that she wasn't going to be the only First Lady of Reality TV.

There was a new First Lady in town. And this one, had class.

Chapter Two

"Get it. Got it? Good."

Rachel Jackson Adams frowned, squinting her eyebrows together as she studied her reflection. "No," she mumbled, then said, "Google me, hun."

She shook her head. "That doesn't work either."

Rachel took another deep breath, wagged a finger at her reflection and said, "I'm about to situate the situation."

"What in the world are you doing?"

Rachel spun around to see her husband, Lester, standing in the doorway of their massive bedroom. He was sweating profusely. Why her husband continued to go running in this brutal Houston heat was beyond her.

"I'm trying to come up with my catch phrase," Rachel replied.

Lester walked in and began removing his t-shirt. "Your what?" he asked.

Rachel sighed. She was really not in the mood to explain Reality TV 101 to her husband, but she knew he wouldn't get it any other way. "My catch phrase," Rachel said, walking over to her husband. She leaned in to peck him on his lips, but backed up when she noticed just how sweaty he really was. "Every reality star has a catch phrase. Like Sheree says, 'Who gon' check me, boo?' Tamar says, 'bomb.com.' Mama Dee says 'In that order'."

"Who are these people?" Lester said, looking confused.

"From the popular reality shows."

Lester shook his head as he walked into the bathroom, stepped out of his shorts, grabbed a towel, and began wiping his face. "See, I can't with you today. I will never for the life of me understand why you watch that foolishness."

Rachel jabbed a warning finger in his direction. "Don't judge me, Lester. Me 'watching that foolishness' is why I landed my own show."

He wiped himself some more, then wrapped the towel around his waist.

"Well, I still don't support that," Lester said, heading to his closet. "I am head of the American Baptist Coalition. The

last thing I need is to have my wife on TV looking crazy," he called out from the walk-in closet.

Rachel rolled her eyes. She liked her timid husband better, the one that let her run all over him. But Lester was feeling himself now that he'd gotten a little power as president of the ABC. Then, add to the fact all the flak he'd caught because of her behavior this past year, now he was trying to get all caveman on her. Well, he'd better recognize. She may have evolved from the slash-your-tires preacher's daughter. But she was still a forge-her-own-path preacher's wife.

Lester walked out of the closet with a dress shirt and tie. Rachel couldn't help but notice it was his Valentino tie. Hmph, when she first met him, he didn't even know how to spell Valentino!

"Number one, I'm not going to be on TV looking crazy. I'm too classy for the trashy." She smiled. That had just come to her. She would definitely have to use that phrase.

Lester didn't bother trying to hide his exasperation as he laid his shirt and tie on the bed. "Is there even a such thing as classy reality TV?"

"If there isn't, there is now," she replied.

"I'm going to take a shower," he said. "I worked out and ran, so I know I'm real tart right about now."

Working out. Something else the 'new and improved' Lester had started doing. Rachel followed him into the restroom.

"So, you're not behind me on this?" she asked, her arms folded across her chest.

Lester inhaled and turned to face her. "Rachel, you know I try to support you. But I just don't understand the need to do this show."

She released a long sigh. She'd already had this conversation with her father. Now, here Lester was giving her a hard time. This had been a dream come true that had literally fallen into her lap. No, Rachel and Oprah weren't exactly the best of friends. But Rachel's friend, Melinda, a former reporter in Los Angeles, did just get hired as OWN's Vice President of Programming, so when she shared the good news with Rachel, Rachel suggested her reality show. Melinda had set up a meeting and Oprah loved the idea (which was a shock within itself because of the disaster Rachel and Jasmine had at the Oprah Show last year). But the reality show -The First Lady - had been fast tracked and here they were. It was divine intervention.

"Lester, it's not like I went out looking for this. It literally fell into my lap and I would be a fool not to take advantage of this opportunity," Rachel protested.

He leaned in and turned the shower on. "As long as this doesn't make us look bad. No fighting, hair pulling and all that other stuff."

"Of course not. It's not like I'd get caught up in some mess like that anyway."

He smiled. "Don't act like it's beneath you."

"See, why'd you have to go there? That's the old me. I don't fight. Anymore. I'm above that. You're always talking about spiritual growth, but you don't want to believe that I've grown spiritually."

He leaned in and gave her a big kiss. She ignored his pungent smell and let him kiss her. "I believe you have, honey," Lester said. "I'm just concerned."

"I'm serious, Lester. This is a great opportunity and I plan to take full advantage of it." Rachel had put her foot down when Lester first said he'd been called to preach. But ultimately he'd called her bluff and did it anyway. She'd caved that time, but there would be no caving this time. Not where Oprah was concerned.

"I just can't believe Oprah gave you another shot," Lester said.

"She knows all of that drama wasn't my fault. That was straight Jasmine."

"Why are you putting all the blame on Jasmine? I thought you two were girls."

"We are. Kinda sorta," Rachel replied. "I mean since I lost my mother, it's great to have a mother figure like Jasmine in my life."

Lester laughed. "Mother? Really, Rachel?"

Rachel frowned. "You're right. Grandmother."

Lester laughed as he shook his head. "Some things will never change. I thought you all were over taking digs at each other."

"We have. But you know, with Jasmine, you just never know. You have to keep one eye open. Like Ephesians 24:7 says, Keep your friends close and your enemies closer."

Lester paused and frowned like he was thinking.

"Rachel, that's not in the Bible. And Ephesians stops at 22."

"I know, baby. I was just testing you. You know I was raised in the church. I know all the bible verses."

Lester laughed as he stepped into the shower. She could tell that even though he wasn't feeling this idea, he wasn't going to fight her on it, which was a good thing because that was one battle he would not win.

Rachel made her way downstairs just as the front door rang. She peeked out the window and saw her best friend, Twyla's car.

There went her peaceful evening. Rachel's brother, David, had taken Rachel's sons - Jordan and ___ - to a baseball game and Twyla had taken the girls to a ballet performance at The Ensemble Theater. Now, Rachel was going to have to listen to Brooklyn's exciting recap for the next hour.

Rachel swung the door open. "Hey my -"

"Shhh," Twyla said, motioning toward Brooklyn who was sound asleep in her arms. "She's knocked out."

Thank goodness, Rachel wanted to say.

"Where's Nia?" Rachel asked as Twyla walked in.

"I hope you don't mind. My niece is at my house and Nia had a fit to stay, so I let her stay. I'll bring her back in the morning." She laid Brooklyn down on the sofa in the living room. "But this one, she's a handful."

Rachel laughed. "That she is." Brooklyn wasn't biologically Rachel's child. Lester's former mistress, Mary, was her mother. For a while, they had thought Lester was the dad, and that led to some major drama, but it had turned out that Mary was lying and when that home wrecker had gotten arrested, Rachel had done the honorable thing and stepped up and taken the child so she didn't have to become a part of the system. (At least that was the story Rachel planned to tell Brooklyn when she was old enough to understand).

"Well, she's all yours now," Twyla said, setting her little backpack down. "I need a bottled water."

Rachel motioned for Twyla to follow her into the kitchen.

"Oh yeah, I caught your interview on Access Hollywood earlier. Girl you rocked it," Twyla said as Rachel handed her a bottle of Oasis spring water. "But umm, why were you looking straight at the camera? Weren't you supposed to be looking at the reporter?"

"*Supposed to* but when has Rachel Jackson Adams ever done anything she was *supposed to* do?" Rachel replied. "You know I wanted to be a reporter so I know how the game is played."

"Then educate me because it looked crazy."

"Are you talking about it?" Rachel asked matter-of-factly.

"Well, yes. . ."

"I rest my case. I know how an interview is supposed to go, but the reality stars that are successful are the ones that are over the top. That's going to be my thing. I'm going to be gone-with-the-wind fabulous. I have to be dramatic. That's what the whole purpose of looking at the camera was about. Get people buzzing."

Twyla released a small chuckle as she sipped her water. "I should've known you had something up your sleeve. What did your new BFF say when you told her about the show?"

Rachel waved her comment off. "First of all, Jasmine is not and never will be, my BFF. That's reserved for you. Secondly, I didn't tell her."

Twyla's mouth fell open. She'd never personally met Jasmine, but she knew all about her and she definitely didn't care for her. "So she doesn't know?"

"She probably knows now if she was watching TV. My agent told me to keep it under wraps until we went formal with the announcement."

"So, you got an agent now?" Twyla raised an eyebrow, like she was really impressed.

"I told you, I'm big time, girl. Anyone that doesn't recognize needs to exit to the rear!" Rachel pointed over her shoulder.

"Huh?" Twyla frowned.

"I'm trying a few catch phrases."

Twyla laughed. "You are silly. But I still think your girl is gonna blow a gasket."

“Jasmine and I are cool now but you know, with her backstabbing history, I have to keep one eye open. Even if she tries to do right, Harriet Tubman might start planting some ideas in her head.”

“Who?”

“Mae Frances. You know I told you about Rachel’s decrepit old friend/nanny/maid/lover, I don’t quite know what that old woman does. But she knows everybody and I don’t need her or Jasmine trying to pull any strings and get my show canceled.”

“Why would they try to get your show canceled?”

“I don’t know, but I’m not taking any chances.”

Twyla shook her head. “Honey. Just let me have a front row seat when she finds out because something tells me she’s not going to take too kindly to this news.”

“I’m not worried about Jasmine,” Rachel responded. “All I have to do is keep being friendly with her. She helped me out in Chicago so she thinks we’re all buddy-buddy now. All I have to do is keep making her think that and we’ll be fine.”

“Okay. I guess you know what you’re doing.”

“I do. I’m not trying to trip on Jasmine now. We seriously are in a much better place. As long as she stays cool, I’m cool.”

"Why do I have the feeling that she is so NOT going to stay cool?"

"Whatever. I'm the head diva in charge. I think she's finally realized that." Although Jasmine and Rachel only talked occasionally, Rachel thought she really had gotten over her jealousy over Lester winning the presidency of The American Baptist Coalition, which made Rachel the top First Lady. So they were in a good space.

"From your lips to God's ears," Twyla said, heading toward the door. "Because you or the ABC can't stand any more drama."

Rachel followed her out. "Oh, I'm done with the drama. This will be smooth sailing. After all, it's my world. My rules." She snapped her fingers. That was it. That was her catch phrase!

"I like that," Twyla said.

"Me, too." They hugged and said their goodbyes.

My world. My rules. That's what be her signature, Rachel thought as she made her way back inside.

Now that that was out of the way, Rachel was ready to get this show started and show the world the real first lady of reality TV!

Chapter 3

Natasia Redding

Divine Intervention!

There was no other way to explain it. All it could be was God and His hands all up in this.

"So, I take it that's a yes!" Melinda said.

"It's a definite yes," Natasia laughed. But then, she coughed.

"Are you all right?" Melinda asked.

"Yes, yes. Something caught in my throat." She coughed again and when she found her voice, she said, "And yes, to the job, too. I thought about it," she continued, then added, "And, I prayed about it. I'm on board for First Ladies. Again, I have to thank you again for thinking of me."

"You're welcome. There are so few of us in this business; we have to stick together. And, I've been a fan of yours since we met at the Emmy's."

"Well, I'm a fan of yours, too," Natasia said, and once again raked through her memories to find one of this woman.

From the moment Melinda had called her last week about being the Executive Producer on her new reality show to this minute, Natasia couldn't ever remember meeting her. Even when she'd Googled her, her face wasn't familiar. But as Natasia had researched the new VP of OWN, she'd found Melinda's accomplishments impressive, though not nearly as impressive as her own.

But with the way Melinda kept raving about her, Natasia wasn't about to tell her new boss that she wouldn't even be able to pick her out of a police line-up. She may not have remembered the woman before, but from this point on, she'd always remember and think of Melinda as her angel. Natasia was riding Melinda's angel wings right back to Hosea Bush.

"So, we have a contract ready for you," Melinda said. "I can email it to you and after you review, you can print out four copies, sign, and get it back to us."

"That's fine. I'll want a couple of days to go over it with my attorney."

"Of course. But if you can expedite this, I'd really appreciate it. Like I told you, we're ready to begin filming within the next few weeks. So, we'll relocate you down here to Atlanta as soon as it's a go on both ends."

Natasia frowned. "Atlanta? Aren't we filming in New York?"

"No, I'm sorry, I thought I told you Atlanta. That's not going to be a problem, is it?"

"Uh...no," Natasia stuttered, as all kinds of questions galloped through her mind. "I just thought...you said Jasmine Larson Bush was the First Lady in the show, correct?"

"Yes, but she's not the only one. I just mentioned her because I knew you'd worked on her husband's show years ago." Melinda paused for such a long moment, that Natasia wondered if

there was more behind Melinda wanting her on the show. When Melinda first called, she'd mentioned Jasmine's name as if she was just an ordinary First Lady in America. But now, Natasia wondered if Melinda knew any of the dirty details that were part of Natasia and Jasmine's history.

Melinda continued, "The show centers on Jasmine and another First Lady, Rachel Jackson Adams out of Houston."

"Oh, I didn't know that."

"Yes. And we're looking for a third person, but we want someone out of Atlanta so that we won't have the expense of relocating her. You'll be involved in helping us choose the third one."

"So that's what you're going to do? Relocate Jasmine and her family?"

"Well, I'm not sure if she's bringing her whole family. We have to sit down with Jasmine and Rachel to discuss that. Sometimes husbands, especially ones who are as prominent as Hosea Bush and Lester Adams, don't want to have anything to do with these shows. But whatever, both Jasmine and Rachel will be relocated to Atlanta for the six weeks of taping. We figured that would be neutral territory."

Natasia leaned forward, resting her elbows on her cherrywood desk and the lines in her forehead deepened. If they weren't going to tape in New York, what would this mean? Would Hosea actually leave his church for six weeks to film a reality show? Natasia couldn't imagine that happening. So if he wasn't going to be in Atlanta, how would she make contact? He was the reason for her getting involved in what she anticipated to be nothing but a hot mess. A reality show? Really? Total madness!

Maybe she could convince Melinda to tape the show in New York. She said, "I don't get it, Melinda. Viewers surely know

that Jasmine is married to Hosea Bush. And if they know that, then they know that he's the pastor of one of the largest churches in New York. So what's he doing in Atlanta? How are you going to explain this to the viewers?" Even though Melinda couldn't see her, Natasia shook her head. "That won't work. The viewers will never believe it."

Melinda laughed like she'd just heard a good joke. "Obviously, you're not a reality TV fan. The viewers don't care where these people live or where they lived before. They don't care if their husbands are there or not. These viewers just want the drama. And the more ratchet, the better."

Natasia groaned inside. See? Definitely madness! There was no way that she would ever lend her name to such a show -- except, she had to do this. This was the doorway she needed.

"Well, you're right about that. I don't watch reality TV," and then, Natasia paused. She hoped she hadn't said that too emphatically, or said too much. She really wanted and needed this job.

"And that's exactly why I want you as the EP," Melinda said. "I want a fresh eye from someone who can bring something to the table besides drama."

It didn't sound like Melinda knew anything of her history with Jasmine, which was a good thing. Because those months that Natasia had worked on Hosea's TV show had been nothing but drama.

"Well, if that's what you want, that's what you'll get. Because I'm just not into drama," Natasia said.

"No problem. I'll handle the drama part. Your job is going to be to make sure that drama is not all that we're about. We need some positivity because I definitely don't want to portray the First Ladies in a *completely* bad light, even though we know there is often more drama in the pews than in the

streets. But at the same time, we do want viewers to walk away, at least some nights, feeling uplifted. That alone will make our show different...and a success."

"Then, that's what we'll do!"

"Perfect. I'm telling you, Natasia, we can ride this reality wave. Especially with Jasmine and Rachel, I can see this going on for three, six, or nine seasons."

Natasia closed her eyes. No matter which way all of this played out for her, she wouldn't need more than one season. She just had to figure out how she was going to use this to get to Hosea. How was she going to get to New York, or get Hosea down to Atlanta?

"So you have the contract, right?" Melinda asked through Natasia's thoughts.

"Yes."

"Great, then what I was thinking, I'd like to fly you into New York within the next few weeks before we start filming."

New York!

Melinda continued, "I'll be there...taking care of some things, and this will give us a chance to sit down and talk this show out face to face. Will that work?"

You have no idea, was what Natasia said inside. Aloud, she said, "Yes, the sooner, the better."

"Okay, well, I'll get back to you on the exact date." She paused for a moment. "There are some arrangements I have to make."

After a few more thank yous and then the final good bye, Natasia hung up the phone, still amazed at how God had stepped in. When Melinda had first called her, Natasia had been sure that this was all God giving her the desires of her heart. But now with New York added in, Natasia was sure that not only was God going to give her what she wanted, but He was setting it up

so that it would be easy. And to think, she'd only been back to going to church on the regular for three months.

She leaned back into the soft leather of her executive chair and reflected on these past months. She thought about all that she'd been learning, the faith that she'd been building, and the prayers that she'd been sending up. God seemed to be coming through for her in every single way. And this call was the best way possible -- she was going to New York; she'd get to see Hosea.

Hosea Bush. The man she hadn't seen or spoken to for more than a minute, in five years. Not since he'd had her thrown off as the producer on his TV show *Bring It On*.

Natasia had had such high hopes back at that time. Her desire had been to be reunited with the man that she'd loved like no other. Of course, when she'd finagled that position, she knew Hosea had a wife. But surely, Hosea couldn't have loved Jasmine the way he'd loved her.

In the end, though, Jasmine was still there and Natasia was the one who'd been kicked to the left.

Natasia slowly pushed herself away from the desk. Those memories, especially of the last time she'd been with Hosea, were not the ones she wanted to remember. She preferred to think about the days when she and Hosea Bush had been planning *their* wedding and *their* long life together.

That would be what she would focus on from now on. Those memories and the new images she had in her dreams during the day and the ones she had at night. In her dreams, it was always the same, Hosea was always glad to see her once again. He was always thrilled to have her back in his life.

The irony of all of this wasn't lost on her: Her dreams were about to become a reality because of reality TV.

Natasia chuckled at that thought as she took slow steps toward her bedroom. All she had to do was figure out the right way to make her presence known. And once she did, she'd see Hosea Bush again.

This was truly an answer to her three months' worth of prayers.

Chapter 4

Mary Richardson

Air had never smelled so fresh.

Mary Richardson recalled an article that said Huntsville, Texas had horrible pollution, ranking at the bottom of the list in air quality. But to Mary, the brisk wind sweeping across her face was Febreeze fresh.

Fresh air. Something she'd known nothing about for the past four years.

Mary looked to her left. Then her right. She wanted to cry when the realization set in that she could go whichever direction she wanted. There was no C.O. telling her which way to turn. There was no warden dictating what she would do next. Every step she made from now on would be on her own terms.

Mary closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. She only opened them when she heard someone say, "There she is! My baby!"

"Babyyyyyy," she said, running into his arms.

Nathan Frazier picked her up and swung her around, smothering her in kisses.

Mary didn't know how long they'd been lost in their embrace but Nathan finally pulled away and said, "Okay, babe, we have many more nights of holding one another. We need to get to the airport. Our plane leaves in three hours."

She smiled and hugged him tightly one last time. He took her hand and said, "And the first thing we're going to do when we get back to Atlanta is go and get this band replaced." He fingered the small metal band on her ring finger.

The old Mary, the con artist always looking for a come-up, the one that was out to get money by any means necessary, would've been all set and ready to go. But the new and improved Mary, the one who had found herself in prison, who had renewed her relationship with God, and who had vowed to become a law abiding citizen, was happy with the ring that was on her finger. Nathan had given her that ring in a small, quaint ceremony in the prison chapel. It was more than enough.

"Honey, I told you. We don't have to get another ring. This one means the world to me," she told him.

Nathan took her hand and led her to the rental car. "And you can keep it - in a box somewhere as a memento." He turned to her. "But baby, I told you, things have been really good this past year. This church business is THE business. Everyone is excited and ready to meet you."

She'd been real nervous about that. "How are they going to feel about having a First Lady that's been in prison?"

"Half the congregation has been in prison. That's how we've been able to build Pleasant City up so. This is a no judgment zone and the folks are eating it up!"

She hated when Nathan talked like he was in the ministry for the money. When she'd first met him as part of the ministry for a local church, he'd seemed genuine in his desire to spread the gospel. But then, just a month after they'd gotten married, he'd gotten an offer to lead a church in Atlanta. He'd taken it and each time he'd returned to visit, he was more and more money and power hungry.

"I told you, we've been doing big things," Nathan said. "I hired a top notch marketing team. We got a grant. And you know the actor, Laurence Hill?"

She smiled, enjoying his enthusiasm. "Yeah, he went to prison for tax evasion. Right?"

"Yeah, but he's out and he's bankrolling a whole new facility at Pleasant City. And once word started spreading about his support, everyone else started getting on board. I told you, moving to Atlanta was the smartest thing I'd ever done!"

She loved seeing her husband so excited. She snuggled closer to him as he pulled out of the parking lot and away from Huntsville Correctional facility for the last time.

Her husband.

Mary still couldn't believe that she'd met and married her soulmate while in prison. She had a flash as she recalled the man she *thought* was her soulmate -Lester Adams. She'd gone to great lengths to get Lester, especially because his wife, Rachel, treated him like dirt.

Mary had managed to get his body, but she could never get his heart and at the end of the day, he and Rachel had overcome their problems and worked things out. Even a baby hadn't been able to break them up.

Her heart actually dropped as she thought of her baby. Rachel had sent her a picture of Sarah (they called her Brooklyn, but she would always be Sarah to Mary). Her baby looked just like her no-good father, Craig. Craig was doing twenty to life for counterfeiting. She'd been sentenced to twenty-five years herself. And it wasn't until Nathan and his prison ministry started coming to Huntsville, that she realized she could turn her life around.

Nathan had done that. Then, he helped her pull some strings and get out early on good behavior. Now, she was ready to start her life anew.

There was a part of her that wished Sarah could be with her. But in order to keep her daughter out of the foster system that she herself had grown up in, Mary had signed away her parental rights to Rachel when she thought she'd be spending twenty-five years in prison.

"Hey, what are you over there deep in thought about?" Nathan asked.

"I'm just thinking about everything," she said, looking out the window. She ran her fingers over the plush seat of the Mercedes. "I'm just not used to all of this."

"Sweetheart, you are now a First Lady, so get used to the finer things. I've got big plans for us. For you." He looked over and grinned widely at her.

"For me? What kind of plans?"

"Can't tell you yet." He grinned like he had a major secret. "But if it pans out, it's gonna be huge."

Mary didn't need anything else. She had Nathan. His stepson, Arvin, whom she'd met in prison. Arvin's mom had died of cancer and he'd taken a liking to Mary so she was looking forward to mothering him.

"Our church is about to blow up, baby!" Nathan said. "Just you wait and see. You're not only about to be rich, you're about to be famous, too!"

She just smiled, relishing in his excitement. Whatever Nathan's big plans were, Mary knew they'd be good.

For now, she just wanted to get to the airport, get on that plane, head to Atlanta and begin her new life.